

INDIAN CHICK LIT: A GENRE FOR *DESI* GIRLS

SONIA VASHISHTA OBEROI

Professor, School of Arts and Humanities, REVA University Bangalore, Karnataka, India

ABSTRACT

Chick Lit, a contemporary genre, is said to have a dual Anglo-American origin in 1996 with the publication of Bridget Jones's Diary in the UK and Candace Bushnell's Sex and the City in the USA. The commercial genre gets the flak from the literary critics as well as adoration from its women readers at the same time. However, there is no denying that Chick Lit has carved a niche for itself in the history of the world literature and after getting enough attention in the western world, it is creating ripples in the literary scenario of India also. No doubt, the desi Chick Lit has its own desi flavours with all the desi spices and ingredients added to the plot and the narrative. It is believed that the genre has been introduced to the young Indian girls with the publication of Advaita Kala's Almost Single in 2007 and there was a spurt of desi Chick Lit books in India read fondly by Indian Urban population especially women.

The present paper is an endeavour to study the desi flavour of this foreign genre and its relation with the life of the contemporary independent and liberated Indian girls leading cosmopolitan lives and to showcase the relationship of this genre with Post-feminism. To explore in depth and support my argument I discuss two representative books of this genre: Almost Single by Advaita Kala and Trust Me by Rajashree.

KEYWORDS: Chick Lit, Indian Girls, Contemporary Genre, Post-Feminism, Indian Feminism

Received: Feb 08, 2017; **Accepted:** Apr 03, 2017; **Published:** Apr 06, 2017; **Paper Id.:** IJELAPR201716

INTRODUCTION

Chick Lit is a comparatively new genre that is being used to describe the books written by women about women and for women. The plot explains in a humorous tone the evolution of an urban heroine while she experiences usual life issues, such as love, marriage, dating, relationships, friendships, roommates, corporate environments, weight issues, addiction, and many more. The present paper is an endeavour to study the *desi* flavour of this foreign genre and its relation with the life of the contemporary independent and liberated Indian girls and women leading cosmopolitan lives. To explore in depth and support my argument I'll discuss two representative books of this genre: *Almost Single* (2007) by Advaita Kala and *Trust Me* (2006) by Rajashree.

DISCUSSIONS

Chick Lit is said to have a dual Anglo-American origin in 1996 with the publication of Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* in UK and Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City* in USA. Cris Mazza and Jaffery DeShell take the credit of coining the phrase for the title of their book *Chick Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* published in 1995. One year later the term was popularized by men writers in a derogatory way to describe the writing of the contemporary female newspaper columnists. It is noticeable that both of the above mentioned books originated as the newspaper columns. The genre is generally discussed in reference to post-feminism and popular culture and is described as 'the new novel of manners,' 'snack-food literature,' 'the treadmill book club' 'the daughter of romance novel and the stepsister of the fashion magazines' etc. The so called commercial genre simultaneously

gets the flak from the literary critics as well as adoration from its women readers. The genre has been described by many male critics and authors as frothy and fluffy and the protagonists have been addressed as the powderpuff girls. Anyhow Chick Lit authors and fans brush off all these offensive adjectives as they know that women-writing has always been criticized. The renowned author Virginia Woolf explains the utter disregard for women's experiences in literature in her seminal work *A Room Of One's Own* (1928) that critics assume that a particular book is significant because it deals with war and the other particular book is insignificant because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing room, the scenes in battlefield are more important than a scene in a room. In fact, Chick Lit continues the gender debate regarding the values and themes of a novel. However, today there is no denying that Chick Lit has carved a niche for itself in the history of the world literature. It can be said that male writers are a bit scared of the popularity of the genre. It is recorded that over two million copies of *Bridget Jones Diary* are sold. *Sex and the City* is above million and the essays have been the basis of the hit series of the same title on HBO and the two blockbuster movies.

There are various definitions, positive as well as negative, available; but one point common to all such definitions is that they all agree that these are the stories which the liberated urban women of the post-feminist era want to read. The new woman can relate to the characters because as Laura Miller, the *New York Times Book Review* columnist says that nobody else is writing about the young women's working lives. The genre is actually contemporary with the movements like the third wave of Feminism and post-feminism. The famous Victorian novelist Jane Austen is considered to be the main inspiration as Helen Fielding tells that her *Bridget Jones' Diary* is the twenty-first century interpretation of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.

Now moving towards the Indian Chick Lit, after getting enough attention in the western world, the genre is creating ripples in the literary scenario of India. The *desi* Chick Lit has its own *desi* flavour with all the *desi* spices and ingredients added to the plot and the narrative. Sunaina Kumar, the leading columnist of the Indian Express addresses Indian chicklit as *Ladki-lit* and states that ten years after the publication of *Bridget Jones's Diary*, the genre of fiction most recognizable for its pink cover art of stilettos, martini glasses and lipsticks, is now being colourfully infused with bindis, saris, and bangles. It is believed that the genre has been introduced to the young Indian girls with the publication of mainly two novels: *Trust Me* by Rajashree and *Almost Single* by Advaita Kala. And then there is seen a spurt of *desi* Chick Lit books. Many of them making to the top of the list of the best sellers in the country. *Trust Me*, 25000 copies sold only in the first month of publication and *Almost Single*, more than 50,000 copies sold: these statistics are self-explanatory.

The author, Advaita Kala, an earlier hotel executive but now a full time writer, accepts in an interview that the story of *Almost Single* is a bit autobiographical. She also explains that she wanted to write about the experience of the Indian Urban women. Kala, who has written the scripts of the movies like *Anjana Anjani* and *Kahaani*. She believes that the things are changing and Indian Urban women are at a very crucial point. Marriage, family, career and independence – all are important to them but may be priorities are changed. Her novel shows in a humorous way the reactions of the family, society and of their own to all these changes. The other author, Rajashree, also states that the plot of her novel is inspired by a true story. She describes her debut novel as a hilarious romantic comedy about emotional healing as it portrays the journey of a young heart-broken girl from bitterness to trust. The Hindi film industry known as Bollywood makes an interesting backdrop as cinema is the author's passion. In fact, she has won a National Prize for her short film *The Rebel*. Now the fact that both the novels became bestsellers within short time of their publication shows how desperately the Indian Urban women wait for the stories which reflect their lives and console them that they are not alone out there in the

world facing all the challenges and pressures that accompany the daring decision of making one's own choices. Reading these novels is a kind of catharsis for them.

Like American and British Chick Lit Indian Chick Lit also has a set recipe: the main plot unwraps the emotional evolution of a not-so-perfect, around thirty girl, who is into in a glamorous but boring job, who chills with a bunch of wonderful girl and gay friends, who cruises through the ups and downs of life and who after falling for one or two bad boys finally meets her Mr. Right to live happily ever after. The heroine continuously gibber-gabbers about her wrong choices in life, her weight issues and her heart-breaks while having posh wines, eating in posh hotels and buying expensive cloths. Now most of all this we find in Indian Chick Lit also but in a different proportion along with a few desi ingredients as the objective of the desi Chick Lit is to showcase and connect with the lives of the Indian Urban woman.

The First Interesting Point about is that the Protagonists of Indian Chick Lit are an Amalgamation of Traditions and Modernity: Though they present a sharp contradiction to the stereotypical image of an Indian woman as they break many norms, yet they represent Indian beliefs and ethnicity. These are the girls in saaris and dupattas. They represent the educated middle class girls of the twenty-first century India who want to make it big in their lives. They hail from small to middle sized cities. They are shown as newly urbanized that means they come from middle-sized towns and middle-class families to the big city to do something big in life. They want to have it all. They respect traditions and cultural norms, but certainly have a mind of their own. That is why they seem to be quirky sometimes with their own set of idiosyncrasies. For example, the protagonist, Aisha Bhatia in *Almost Single*, is from Nashik but works in Delhi. She wears saari with Reebok shoes as her job in a five star hotel demands her to wear the ethnic attire but she pairs it up with the comfortable shoes as her job also expects her to be on her toes the entire day. She smokes and drinks and wants to enjoy her life but she still believes at the age of twenty-nine that an arranged marriage can happen to her and feels worried when her mother asks her to find a match for herself as it conveys that she has passed the age of arranged marriage, "When your parents stop matchmaking and turn philosophical, it's time to worry" (*Almost Single*, 12). She is registered with the online marriage portals and has her astrologer's number on the top of the speed-dial list of her phone and even keeps a karvachauth fast for Karan Verma. In the same way, Parvati, the protagonist in the novel *Trust Me*, is from Amaravati. She comes to Mumbai to work as an art director and ends up working as one of the assistants of a flamboyant director. When the novel opens Parvati, in her mid-twenties, is shown trying to come to terms with herself after a heart-break and an enforced abortion. She falls in love and also develops physical intimacy with her lover as she is convinced that their affair will change into marriage. This can be taken as the behaviour typical to an Indian girl, but things change for her when she gets to know that she is pregnant. She pleads her lover to marry her but the boy denies to take their relationship further. Obviously she knows that she cannot keep the child as an unmarried mother is a taboo in Indian society. She does not have any other choice and she goes for an abortion without informing anybody in her family. However, the things become even worse when she has to quit her job because her much elderly and much married boss tries to make a pass at her. She joins the production unit of the eccentric Director Jambuwant Sinha who believes in white shoes, black money and likes every woman. While working here, Parvati comes to know about the realities like casting couch and the insecurities of the struggling actors rampant in the Hindi film industry. Shaken and disappointed she reaches a conclusion that all men are bastards. But before she becomes bitter enough to believe the dictum whole heartedly, she meets Rahul Kapoor, the struggling actor, who makes Parvati trust again on the mankind. The novel has the Hindi Masala film like narrative and gives the readers a sneak-peak of how the Hindi film industry works. Both the novels portray the struggle of the working girls in India, though their treatment of subject and way of presentation is different from each other: If Advaita Kala

presents it as a light-hearted burlesque, Rajashree presents it in a more somber comic-tragedy. Nevertheless, both the novels succeed in exposing what all the single working girls of India are going through. Both the books tell their side of the story.

Indian Chick Lit Presents the Indian Society and Culture Very Aptly: We all know that there are always a few things peculiar and specific to a society and culture. These books have a tangy flavour of Indian-ness in them. For example, Aisha's mother repeats the same question daily, "So, have you met anyone interesting?" (Almost Single 11). Aisha's answer explains how irritated she feels by the same question every day, "Well, no one between yesterday and today, but there is always a tomorrow" (Almost Single 11). Her mom, like a typical Indian mother, blames her bad karma because her around thirty girl is still unmarried. She says heaving a deep sigh, "Chalo, it's all karma at the end of the day." (Almost Single 12). Aisha's mother does not like Aisha's gay friends Ric and Nic. She reminds her again and again to maintain a distance from them and repeats many times that Aisha should not be influenced by them. Thus a very apt desi factor of these novels is – the portrayal of the typical Indian mother. Along with it the mother-daughter relationship also is exposed. Daughters are generally considered closer to their mothers in India. Daughters know that they are always answerable to their mothers for whatever they do in their lives and same way they know that their mothers are always available to guide and help them. The protagonists of these books are sure about one thing that whatever happens in their lives they always have a mother to support or scold them. These girls are emotionally well-connected to their mothers and kind of absorb the strength from them to always carry on, no matter what bad things happen in life. The mothers themselves are described as quite strong characters. For example, Aisha's mother does not believe in keeping the karvachauth fast and Parvati's mother, a widow, takes care of the entire family on her own. The eternal conflict related to the Indian matrimony, that is arranged marriage versus love marriage, is presented beautifully in all these novels. The institution of marriage is changed over a period of time. The independent and educated girls of India want career as well as marriage. They know that for an Indian girl having a great career is not enough in life she wants/has to be married also. They respect traditions and cultural norms, but certainly have a mind of their own; so marriage becomes a critical issue as they want a partner who can love them as they are and respect their freedom. They can compromise but only to a certain level. And an Indian boy with such qualities is not impossible but really difficult to find. Also the issue, like - divorce, premarital sex and consequent abortions, extra-marital affairs, live-in relationships, gay relationships etc., which are considered as anathemas in the middle-class Indian society as compared to the western one are discussed and presented. These issues are presented in a certain way that shows that though all the above-mentioned are condemned openly but all these things happen in society; and right now Indian middle-class is in a situation of flux regarding the acceptance of these western ways. Thus as Neelam Raaj in her article 'Write up their alley: chick lit brigade grows' these young authors "are mapping a social shift in India". Moreover, the use of Hindi swear words and phrases makes the language interesting and *desi*. In the novel *Trust Me*, the reader gets an insider's view about the working of Hindi film industry known as Bollywood: where the hero and heroine of a masala movie have to shoot a romantic song sitting on the back of a buffalo in the middle of a dirty pond, where a struggling star has to work according to the whims and fancies of the directors and producers as well as the famous actors to get that much-awaited big break, where the body of a female actor is more important than her acting skills. Bright colours, quirky songs, voluptuous heroines, struggling actors, idiosyncratic directors – all distinctive about Bollywood is there in *Trust Me*. These books also talk about the tough life of these not-so-young girls in big city. Parvati hates her comeback to Mumbai. Life in Mumbai is portrayed very honestly in the first few pages of *Trust Me*: "Coming back to Bombay [now Mumbai] felt like an assault on the senses.... Everybody was

in a hurry, but in typical Bombay fashion, nobody was getting anywhere” (Trust Me 1-2). She even hates her dingy room beside a sewer and stinking room-mate but she knows that she cannot afford anything better. On the other hand, Aisha in *Almost single* first introduces herself to the reader and then comments, “Hence this introduction. It stinks, but it sticks. Actually, it’s quite in sync with the way society looks upon single women of a certain age” (Trust Me 3). Advaita Kala explains in an interview with Hiten Vyas about the motif of her novel in an interview, “I was little frustrated with the way single women were viewed in society, as incomplete. *Almost Single* was a way of dealing with this bias with humor and driving home a point ... and [it] found its readers.” She further explains that Indian urban girls are at a very interesting point. Their situation today is very unique. It is a time of great opportunities but also they have to make difficult choices. Indian urban women are redefining itself.

These Novels Advocate the Indian Feminism Presented In a Simple but Clear way as we know that in India the oppression and subjugation of women is more a socio-cultural concern than a political or religious one, so making an independent (financially as well as mentally) and educated woman the protagonist is itself unprecedented and from feminism point of view it is like putting the best foot forward. It is like portraying and showing the other side of the coin. The mainstream Indian literature written in English generally portray women as victims of the patriarchal Indian society. We have dozens of women writers who are writing about women related issues in India, but the contribution of *desi* Chick Lit is: they portray not the plight but the CHANGE. The change that has happened in the condition of the Indian women. It cannot be denied that things are changed and still changing for many women, especially in cities and educated families. In today’s India, particularly in urban set-up, girl child of the family gets equal opportunities and freedom in all the matters of life. These novels present in front of the audience the independent educated single working women who are free from the root-level gender specific constraints in India. Moreover, the protagonists of these books are into the careers which are hitherto considered unconventional, though not completely unexplored, for an average Indian girl. Like Parvati is shown as working as an assistant director on Bollywood sets and Aisha is into hotel industry. They venture into the careers and territories generally related to men in the patriarchal society. So they represent the Emancipated Indian Woman. They represent the change and that is very important.

CONCLUSIONS

It is generally told that Chick Lit faces the problem of association and representation as far as Indian women of small towns and rural areas are concerned but I say that we all know that there are many sides of the twenty first century India and the literature of the country should represent every facet of India. Moreover, Chick Lit conveys a positive message regarding women’s situation in society and thus can inspire and motivate the young women all over India. One other fault found with these books is their stereotypical content, but if we give a closer look these are not only the girl-meet-guy kind of stuff; rather the novels deal with many important social and emotional issues like gender discrimination, corporate culture, matrimony and relationships, and describe the transition Indian youth is going through. Advaita Kala rightly states in an interview: “I am keenly aware that my book represents a sliver of Indian society, but it is a growing sliver.” So I conclude that there is no denying that Chick Lit is an emerging and evolving genre consisting of bold and heartfelt stories specially written by the young Indian women, about the young Indian women, and for the young Indian women of the contemporary India.

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